



*Boott Mill boardinghouse residents, circa 1875 (Collection of Lowell NHP)*

\$1.50 per week) were deducted from wages. For this amount, workers were served three meals a day, received limited laundry service, and shared a bedroom.

Sharing their space with relatives, friends from home villages, and strangers, millworkers found little privacy. Bedrooms were often shared by four to six people, commonly sleeping two in a double bed. The rooms in all the boardinghouses were crowded with wooden furniture, trunks, and boxes. In such close quarters, experienced workers helped new hires adapt to unfamiliar city life.

### TRANSITIONS

Conveniences, such as electricity, central heat, or indoor plumbing were

not available until the late 19th or early 20th century. Residents had to use an outdoor privy, infrequently cleaned, in an attached shed extending behind the boardinghouse. Unsanitary and crowded conditions, contaminated drinking water, the presence of vermin, and inadequate hygiene often led to serious health problems. These problems were not limited to corporation housing. In fact, sanitation was so poor city-wide that the City of Lowell's Board of Health, in 1890, ordered all privies abandoned and replaced by water closets hooked up to a sewer line.

With expansion and an increased demand for labor, the work force in Lowell began to change in ethnicity and gender. While the first workers in Lowell were of English, Scottish and

Irish descent, later workers included French-Canadian, Greek, and Portuguese immigrants, as well as immigrants from Poland and other Eastern European countries, who took up unskilled jobs in the mills. Immigrant workers, often in family groups, predominated as boardinghouse residents. By 1900, male boardinghouse residents outnumbered female, a remarkable departure from the past.

### END OF AN ERA

Changing social values and competitive capitalism rendered old forms of paternalism obsolete. When corporations found boardinghouse maintenance too expensive, they began to sell off the buildings, converting them to storage facilities or demolishing them to make way for warehouses or other structures. Boott corporate housing continued to be home for mill workers and their families long after the Yankee "mill girls" ceased to be the major part of the labor force.

The boardinghouse system continued well into the 20th century, becoming mainly privately-run, family tenement housing, finally expiring along with Lowell's textile industry. Neglect and urban renewal caused almost all of Lowell's boardinghouses to disappear.

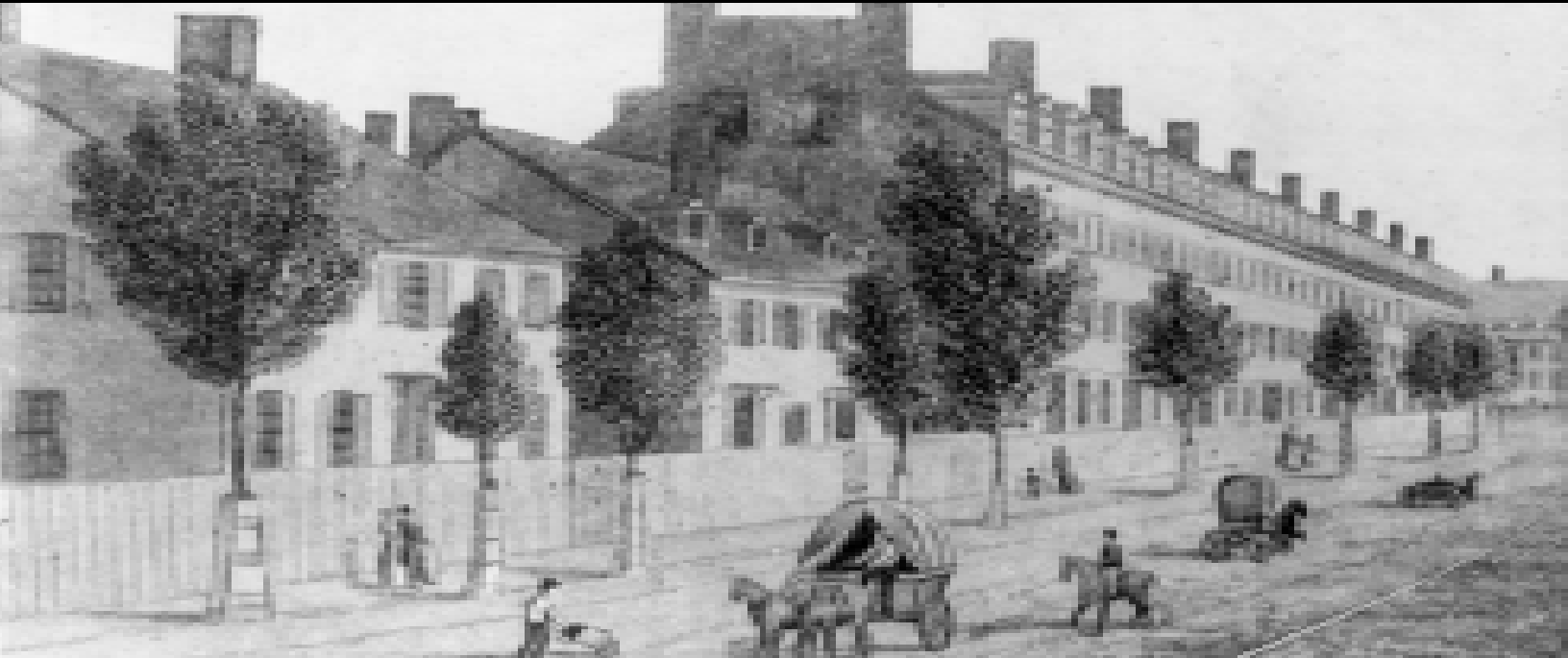


The Boott Cotton Mills, incorporated in 1835, originally built thirty-two boardinghouse units designed for unskilled, unmarried workers, and thirty-two tenement units for supervisors or skilled laborers and their families. These units were housed in eight rowhouse blocks, each with four boardinghouse units in the center and two tenements on either end. The tenement units were more like apartments or independent living quarters for single families, with individual kitchen facilities. The boardinghouse units were more dormitory-like. The rowhouses were situated directly across the canal from the Boott Cotton Mills. They were 150 feet long, 36 feet deep, and built in the early Georgian style. The buildings were constructed with common brick laid in English bond, with granite foundations, sills, and lintels, using six-over-six double-hung sash windows, wood-paneled doors, and topped with slate roofs, dormers, stepped chimneys, and "Dutch" or gabled ends.

*1928 View of Boott boardinghouse rows shows architectural changes before demolition. (Locks and Canals Collection, Lowell NHP)*

# The Working People Exhibit & The Boardinghouse System

Lowell National Historical Park  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior



Merrimack Manufacturing Company Boardinghouses, 1848 (Collection of Lowell NHP)

**T**HE WORKING PEOPLE EXHIBIT  
*Through a self-guiding tour, explore the history of Lowell's "mill girls" and immigrants. Walk into a corporation boardinghouse unit, complete with a kitchen, bedrooms, and a dining room furnished in the style of the 1850s. Listen to the conversations of 19<sup>th</sup>-century women workers brought to life by an audio program, and look at the social world of the various immigrant groups in Lowell, from the first Irish laborers to recent Cambodian refugees.*



Dining Room/Parlor, Working People Exhibit  
(Collection of Lowell NHP)

*The Working People Exhibit tells the human story of the Industrial Revolution by featuring the experiences of Lowell's working people. The exhibit is housed in the Mogan Cultural Center, 40 French Street, in a reconstructed corporation boardinghouse. ♿*



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Visit our web site at  
<http://www.nps.gov/lowe>

## THE BOARDINGHOUSES

Incorporated as a town in 1826, Lowell grew to contain numerous water-powered factories, as well as boardinghouses for its workers. Aware of the need to attract and meet the basic needs of a varied workforce, the corporations built

low-cost, communal living units. Early boardinghouses in Lowell and other New England mill towns were two-and-a-half-story, whitewashed duplexes made of wood. By the mid-1830s, three-and-a-half-story, brick rowhouses, reflecting the now more familiar Lowell boardinghouse design, became the norm. Housing about 20-40 people, boardinghouses contained a kitchen, a dining room/parlor, a keeper's quarters, and up to ten bedrooms. These boardinghouse blocks distinguished Lowell from earlier New England mill towns.

Hailing from New England farms, male and female workers were overseen by paternalistic owners and managers who sought to control not only factory production, but also the social and cultural character of the workers. The corporations assumed guardianship of the moral character and physical well-being of the young women. The Yankee "mill girls," as they were called, lived in closely supervised company-owned and -run boardinghouses from about 1823-1860.

## BOARDINGHOUSE LIFE

Under this early form of corporate paternalism, the millworkers' behavior came under the watchful eyes of the boardinghouse keepers, who were required to report any immoral behavior or misconduct to mill management. The keepers were also responsible for purchasing or renting everything needed to furnish a house and feed its occupants. Room and board costs (approximately \$1.25-